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THEOLOGY OF CHONG YAK JONG

for

EC 40 History of Asian Christianity

Professor Samuel Moffett

by

Heup Young Kim

Princeton Theological Seminary

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I. Introduction

Recently a very stimulating and important study¹ on Chong Yak Jong and his writing *Chu Gyo Fo Ji* (Essentials of the Lord Teaching--hereinafter ELT) has been done by a Mexican-American priest, Hector Diaz, M.G., who has worked in the southwest countryside of Korea for many years.² It is not only a thoroughful and just study of subject matter but also the author shows his sincere Christian love and passion toward Korea, Koreans, and their heritage and history throughout the dissertation. Diaz points out that "it is a known fact that Korea did not receive the faith through missionaries."³ He emphasizes on the truth that "guided only by the Holy Spirit, long before the first Western missionaries set foot in Korea, and before the first Chinese priest came, they received Western science and Christianity into their own culture and frame of mind."⁴ And he emphatically calls⁵ attentions of his fellow Korean Christians with the following claim:

It is a gift of God that the Korean Church was founded by lay Korean people. It is also a gift from God that at the beginning they made a creative adaptation of Christian doctrine into the Korean culture. The thousands of conversions that Church has today are also a gift from God. It is the opinion of the this dissertation's author that the time is ripe for the Korean Church to go back to its roots and rediscover its founders and their work because in them is found the basis for the Korean theology which is well adapted to the Korean culture, and is badly needed today.⁵

¹*A Korean Theology: Chu-Gyo Fo-ji: Essentials of the Lord's Teaching by Chong Yak-jong Augustine (1760-1801)* Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1986.

²For his self-introduction, see *ibid.* p. 9.

³*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 78.

It is our shame to see that we still hear this call of God for our time through the foreign Christian brothers and sisters and that this kind of study has been performed by others. Diaz is right because the fundamental cause of the chaotic situation of today's Korean Church is the loss of her identity according to the yet-prevailing docetic (Western) theologies. The study like this can contribute to heal this chronic disease of Korean Church whose basic cause is *amnesia*. I also convince that the task of Korean theologians today is to construct a contextual theology which fits in the "Korean Paji and Chima Chogori."⁶ It does not necessary mean to nationalize or Koreanize the theology but to theologially define the basic identity of the Korean Church as Korean so as to become a successful vessel to witness the universal Christian messages to others. Without knowing oneself first, one cannot fully convey truth to others even if it is whole truth, nothing but truth. In this context, the discovery of Chong Yak Jong was tremendously significant for my interest. Chong Yak Jong was not only a self-cultivated, creative, constructive, lay theologian with great evangelical zeal, but also, he was a martyr. He should be a precedent paradigm of Korean contextual theologian.

This paper is just a summary of my discovery on Yak Jong, the first Korean Christian theologian. In the next chapter (II), his life and works will be briefly introduced. Then, I will make a reflection on Yak Jong's theology based on his writings of *Chu Gyo Jo Ji* (ELT) in Chapter III. Finally, the significance of Yak Jong will be assessed in the last chapter. Since *Chu Gyo Jo Ji* (ELT) was written in the old Korean which does not have any punctuation mark, the identification of paging has been neglected in this paper and therefore there is no footnote when it deals with ELT.

⁶Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.

II. The Life of Chong Yak Jong (1760-1801)

Chong Yak-Jong was born, 1760, the 36th year of King *Fong Cho*, at the place of today's *Fanju-kun Wabu-myon Nungnae-ri*, as the third son of *Chong Chae Won*. His family was a member of the *Namin*. And he was educated in the spirit of Neo-Confucianism from the birth. Particularly he had a very close relationship with the contemporary *Silhak* scholars. His younger brother was the famous *Silhak* scholar *Tasan, Chong Yak Jong*. His brother-in-law was *Yi Sung-Hun* who was the first baptized by Roman Catholic when he went to China as a companion of the Yi-Dynasty's annual delegation. *Yi Ka Hwan*, great nephew of *Yi Ik* (the founder of *Silhak* school) was also one of his closest friends as well as a relative.

Therefore, he was well educated with Classic Chinese literature and an expert on Neo-Confucianism. However, he was not satisfied with them and looked into Taoism. Nor the emptiness of Taoism could satisfy him. Thus, he began to study the Western science and Christianity but he did not accept it immediately. After convincing the existence of the Lord and the worth of the Lord's teaching, he was baptized by his older brother *ChongYak Jon* in 1786 and received Augustine as his Christian name. Around the time, the Korean government began to persecute the new Christian converts on the grounds that this perverse religion would destroy the foundation of society (i.e. because they burned the ancestor tablets).

After baptism, Yak Jong, according to his deep Confucian sense of duty, he tried to propagate this teaching to everyone regardless of their social level. He became aware of the need for a book for the ignored simple people



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(*masjung*), because the most of writings were in Chinese at that time and the common people could not read any of them. For this reason, Yak Jong wrote *Chu Gyo To Ji* (ELT). The first Korean catechism was produced in Korean vernacular language not in Chinese which was the official language at that time. Therefore, it was not essentially written for the elite group but for the common people (*masjung*), as Diaz explained:

The ELT is the first Korean catechism, the first complete work of adaptation of Christianity to the Korean people, and the first work of vulgarization of Christianity. Augustine's [Yak Jong's] use of Korean in his ELT established a definite tradition which is still followed in the Catholic Church elsewhere.⁷

Later ELT was authorized by Father Chu Mon Mo (1752-1801) who came to Korea as the first Catholic priest since Fr. Gregorio de Cespedes S.J. who accompanied ^{the} with Japanese army in their invasion ^{of} to Korea(1593). And Fr. Chou appointed him president of the *Myong Do Hoe* which was made to promote the study of the Lord's teachings. The leadership of Chong Yak Jong and his book ELT were very important assets for this very early Catholic Church in Korea. However, the political power was transferred into the hands of those who were very anti-*Martin* and the religious persecution became more severe. After ~~of all~~, some evidences were revealed to the police, Chong Yak Yong, Yi Ki Hwan, and Yi Sung Hun were arrested. Later Yak Jung was also arrested in 1801. Recantation was requested to all by the judge. His brother Yak Yong and others recanted to save the lives of his family and was exiled. But Yak Jong rejected recantation; on the contrary, he firmly declared:

If I had recognized the Lord's teaching as a heretical teaching, how could I have accepted it? But I know that the Lord's teaching is the most impartial, the most right, and the most trustful and reasonable.

⁷Ibid., p. 43.

Therefore, even if it was forbidden in the country many years ago, from the very beginning I did not change my mind. Therefore, even if I have to die 10,000 times, I will not regret it.⁸

Therefore, he was beheaded on April 8, 1801. The following is the scene of his last moments described by Dallet:

When he was led to the torture, his face appeared all luminous. During the journey, he called the driver and told him that he was thirsty. The bystanders reprimanded him, he answered, "It is to imitate my great patron that I ask for a drink." He was a tireless preacher in prison and before the tribunal. He made his martyrdom a theatre, a very eloquent pulpit. Sitting in front of the instruments of his torture, he contemplated them happily. Then with an elevated voice which could be heard by all the people he exclaimed, "The Supreme Lord of heaven and earth, and of all beings, existing by Himself and infinitely adorable, has created and preserved you. You all should be converted to your First Principle and do not make it a subject of mockery and banter. What you look upon as a shame and disgrace will soon be for me eternal glory."

He was interrupted when he was informed to place his head on the block. He placed himself in a manner that he could see heaven, saying, "It is better to die looking towards heaven than earth."

The executioner trembled and dared not strike, but finally the fear of punishment overcame that of admiration. With an unsteady hand he gave a first blow with the sword. The head was only half-cut. Augustine held himself erect, made a visible sign of the cross and placed himself peacefully in the same position to receive the mortal blow.

Thus died Chong Augustine at the age of forty-two years, a most remarkable man and one of the greatest martyrs whom Christian religion has reckoned in this country.⁹

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Yak Jong was not only martyr among members of his direct family but also his eldest son *Chol Sang* Charles (with him), his another son *Ha Sang* Paul, his wife *Ju So Sa* Cecile, and his daughter *Chong Hae* Elizabeth were all

⁸Ibid., pp.48f.

⁹*History of the Korean Church, vol. 1*, pp. 124f.

martyred continuously. Not only himself alone but also his whole household were the faithful followers of Jesus Christ until death; not only by words but also by deeds the whole family of Yak Jong faithfully witnessed Jesus Christ. Their sacrifice and blood of martyrdom became the real and true foundation of all Korean Christian Churches.

III. Theology of Chong Yak Jong.

ELT¹⁰ is composed of two parts.¹¹ In the first part, it argues about the ontological proof of the existence of God ("the first principle"), explained the attributes of God, and gave a polemic against Buddhism. The second part is composed according to the salvation history (Adam's sin, fall, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension) and evangelical urging. Thus, the first part is more doctrinal while the second is more a story telling about Jesus. Simply speaking, the Part I is written for the Doctrine of God and the Part II is for the Christology.

ELT calls God and Jesus Christ *Chon Ju* (literally, Heavenly Lord). Yak Jong did not call Him *Sang Je* as Matteo Ricci and other missionaries in China did. Here is Yak Jong's uniqueness. His intention was not doing an apologetic as Jesuit missionaries in China did. On the contrary, he sharply distinguished God as *Chon Ju* the Heavenly Lord, from *Sang Je* --the ambiguous heavenly being who was much related to the Confucian-Taostic cosmology. He radically emphasized the distinction between God and Buddha. Buddha is

¹⁰Chong Yak Chong also wrote his second book *Sas-Gyo Jos-So* (The Complete Book of the Holy Teaching). But it was destroyed during the persecution.

¹¹For content, see the appendix.

only a creature of God. In other words, he clearly separated the being of God from a *preexistent* notion of divinity present in Korea; Tao, Taeguek, Ok Hwang Sang Je, Buddha, etc. *Chos ju* is the ultimate goal of all of them. But He is not just "blue heaven" but he is a person and the Lord of universe including human being. On the basis of ^{his} reasoning (li), ELT successfully shows that *Chos ju* is the being who does not only transcend all of Confucian, Taoistic, Shamanistic, and Buddhistic understanding of the divinity but also is in fact their ultimate end and the Lord of all.¹²

Yak Jong's treatment of ^{the} problem of theodicy is superb. God is so just that He gives ~~the~~ reward even to the wicked for his good work and ~~that~~ He cannot forget the punishment of the good for his mistakes. Thus we can see the theodicy in the world. He has a very strong notion of the justice of God (*Yong Eob*). It is very much connected with the eschatology of heaven and hell. Because it is so important for Yak Jong, he sharply distinguished ^{it} from the eschatology of ^{the} Korean version of ~~the~~ pure land Buddhism (*Mireukbulgyo*), ^{which he} ~~and~~ refuted ~~it~~ ^{as} totally false. However, it is very important to notice that Yak Jong's doctrine of heaven and hell is not related to a doctrine of predestination or election but it is related to the justice and goodness of God.

Yak Jong definitely has a doctrine of the Trinity. But it ^{is} ~~does~~ not reflect ^{it} much in ELT. There is not any explicit explanation of the Holy Spirit. The bases of his argument are the superiority of reasoning (Li), lordship, and teaching all of which are quite related to the Confucian value system. Thus,

¹²Diaz expresses his agreement ^{with} ~~that~~ ^{who} Yak Jong did not use the term *Hananism* or *Haneunism* because it does not have a connotation of the supreme personal God (e.g. Ibid., pp. 178ff.). However, Diaz is wrong because the term *Haneunism* already had not only a notion of personal and supreme being but also that of fatherhood of all mankind. cf. *Gyung Chong Kim, "Haneunim Gyenyum Bakdalsa," Hakgu Munhwa Daegyoe VI*, pp. 117-178; C. A. Clark, *Religions of Old Korea*

Yak Jong was ~~yet~~ speaking in the frame of Neo-Confucianism. Father-Son relationship is also understood in the frame of Confucian understanding of filial piety and is the only explicit description of inter-trinitarian relationship.

In the second part, ELT's explanation of the salvation history is excellent. The work of Christ is superbly articulated in the form of story-telling. The doctrine of atonement is carefully described with the theories of satisfaction, substitution, and sacrifice. The Chalcedonian Christology on the person of Christ is continuously confirmed with the soteriological reasoning. The most wonderful part is in the story of the Lord's Passion. Yak Jong may have projected his own martyrdom when he wrote about this. Therefore, the theology of the cross is very much emphasized in the ELT. The calling as a Christian is not for the triumphant, glorious, and self-righteous living in the world, but, on the contrary, it is a calling to ~~the~~ suffering and sacrifice in the *Tao* (way) toward the truth. ~~The~~ Confucian hardship and single-minded discipleship have common ground in doing this. In the ELT, there is no imagery of Church triumphant or Church militant in conquering spirit.

IV. The Significance of Chong Yak Jong's Theology.

Among many other things,¹³ I want to point out the following six-fold significance of Yak Jong's theology: (1) it is a contextual theology which was developed by Yak Jong's purely independent work. (2) It is not an apologetic but an evangelical theology. Yak Jong's theology is not merely an attempt of

¹³Diaz characterizes Yak Jong's theology as Korean and Oriental, Lord-centered, constructive, popular, concrete, cosmic, wisdom, illuminative, liberation, revolution, optimistic, natural (environmental), lay, pacific, feminine, and Minjung. Ibid., pp. 248f.

philosophy, but it has rather an affinity with faith-seeking-understanding. (3) It is not written in Chinese for [^]minority of the elite literary group but in vernacular Korean for the mass of *minjung* (4) It is not ~~but~~ a doctrinal but a story-telling theology (5) It is a Christo-centric theology. Therefore, (6) it is not a denominationally and ecclesiastically exclusive theology, but an ecumenical and inclusive theology. (7) It does not propose the theology of glory based on the one-sided doctrine of election but it strongly suggests the theology of the cross appealing to the *Sinner's* single-minded obedience and faithful discipleship.

1. Independent, Contextual Theology: As mentioned, Yak Jong had never been trained in the seminary or instructed by any other missionary. It was entirely constructed by his own self-study with a zealous sense of calling. It was written even before any Western missionary set his foot on Korean soil for pastoral work. Therefore, it is Yak Jong's own independent, creative, constructive, contextual theology.

2. Evangelical Theology: Yak Jong was not interested in ~~the~~ philosophical and academic discussion. But he felt the urgency and the need of the Gospel to the people. His interest ^{was} ~~had~~ [^]more ~~had~~ on the proclamation of his witness to the Lord. He did not want to make an apologetic against Neo-Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Shamanism in which he had much knowledge. But he wanted to say that the Lord's teaching was far more true and significant than ^{was} ~~they~~. Hence he directly appealed to the faith. He ^{was} ~~did~~ not concern ^{ed} much ~~about~~ ^{with} pure knowledge or wisdom but ~~he~~ talked about the truth ~~which was~~ ^{as it is} related to ~~the~~ life itself and its meaning.

3. *Minjung* theology: Yak Jong was an excellent Neo-Confucian scholar who had no problem ~~to~~ ^{to} write ⁱⁿ Chinese character which was the official ^{style} ~~letter~~ for the literati. But writing ELT in Korean vernacular was exceptional

and a courageous act at that time, because it was a shameful act for the educated man like Yak Jong to write in Korean. It was only possible because his love to the mass was so strong and enthusiastic. It was truly written for the *minjung* out of a *sunbi's* pathos toward his people (*minjung*).

4. Narrative Theology: ELT's emphasis is on the story of the man, Jesus. Yak Jong did not attempt a doctrinal campaign but he only tried to tell the story of incredible good news as a sincere story-teller. In this, ELT was powerful and became so influential among early Korean Christians. Yak Jong's concern and interest were not on the academical discourse of doctrines but he wanted to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth in blood and flesh which he knew and convinced as the source of new life.

5. Christo-centric Theology: Yak Jong's naming God was *Chon ju* which means the Heavenly Lord. For Yak Jong *Chon ju* was same as Jesus. In other words, God was understood as the father of Jesus in the same lordship. Hence, the God he described is the revealed God in Jesus Christ. As the title of ELT itself expressed, he emphasized on the lordship of Jesus, Jesus as the exemplar of the teacher, and the loyalty of us as disciples to the teachings of that master. The doctrine of *imitatio Christi* was much included.

6. Ecumenical Theology: In ELT ecclesiological concern was never emphasized. Yak Jong even called the new religion *Chon ju Gyo* which means the teaching of the Heavenly Lord. The significance of this new religion does not lie in its form but its essence. The institutional matter was not primary concern for Yak Jong but the truth of its Christological teaching. The truth of the teaching is fundamental rather than any institutional form or succession of human authority. His Gospel is just simple: if we, Korean, believe in Jesus as the lord and savior, we all also will be saved.

7. Theology of the cross: ELT does not recommend the self-righteous and prestigious attitude of ^aChristian as a Chosen one. On the contrary, humility and obedience to the true teaching are emphasized. When Yak Jong wrote ELT, the environment was not safe at all. Always the eyes of ^{the} government watched him and the dangers of persecution followed him. When he wrote about the passion of Jesus, he must have imagined his own tragic destiny because of this new faith. Yak Jong's ELT was ^{not} never written in ^{an} the arm-chair but it was written in the street and ^{his} secret chamber or that of his friend's house. He always risked his own life. ELT can never be regarded as merely an academical theological treatise but it is the shout and cry of his faith in compassionate sharing with the pain and misery of his people, *minjung*

Finally, ELT is Yak Chong's faith statement written with his own blood on the heart of all Korean, his most beloved people. Therefore, it was, it is, and it will be the most foundation of all Korean Churches. We, followers of his footsteps, must bow our heads in front of his martyrdom and meditate his *Gyo Fo Ji* as the treasure of us all.

A very fine paper indeed
Your description of the little known
book and of the author's attitude
is a valuable addition to the
literature on this early
Christianity.

Very up the road with

Appendix: Content of Chu Gyo Yo Ji (Essentials of the Lord Teaching)

Essentials of the Lord's Teaching, part 1.

1. Man's mind by itself knows the existence of God (*Chos ju*).¹
2. Everything² cannot come into existence by itself.
3. Everything cannot come into existence spontaneously.
4. By seeing the heavens move and turn we know the existence of *Chos ju*.
5. Man necessarily comes into existence by *Chos ju*.
6. There is only one *Chos ju*.
7. *Chos ju* by nature exists and by Himself exists.
8. *Chos ju* has no beginning and has no end.
9. *Chos ju* is extremely spiritual and has no shape.
10. There is no place where the *Chos ju* is not.
11. *Chos ju* is infinitely resourceful.
12. *Chos ju* knows (everything) perfectly.
13. *Chos ju* is extremely beautiful and precious.
14. *Chos ju* is three persons but is constituted as one.
15. The Blue Heaven³ is not *Chos ju*.
16. Heaven and Earth by themselves are not able to bring into existence of everything.⁴
17. The so called "Ok Hwang Sang Je" is false.
18. Buddha and the Bodhisattva are men brought into existence by *Chos ju*.
19. For Buddha to say that he, himself, is the only "venerable in the world" is extremely foolfish.
20. What the Buddhist scriptures say is all false and nothing is trustworthy.
21. "Man has a previous life and a later life. man after death becomes an animal. Animal after death becomes a man." Those words are false.
22. The Buddhist scriptures' arguement about the joys and sufferings in heaven⁵ and hell⁶ are only words of ignorance.

¹Yak Jong used the term *Chos ju* (the Heavenly Lord)

²*Manmul* (literally, 10,000 things).

³*Pureun Haneul*

⁴*Manmul*

⁵*Chos Dang* (in the ELT. *Tyon Dang*)

⁶*Ji Ok* (in the ELT. *Di Ok*)

23. The words of the Buddhist scriptures are contradictory and untrustworthy.
24. What the Buddhist doctrines say about the law of reward and punishment by reason is absurd.
25. The statements "attained nirvana" and "became Buddha" are false.
26. What is called "the way of Buddha" and "the way of *Chos ju*" are not alike.
27. To serve the sundry evil spirits is a serious sin.
28. *Chos ju* will without fail give a reward to good men and punish bad men.
29. Man after death, because he has a soul, will receive reward or punishment.
30. The soul necessarily will receive joy or suffering.
31. *Chos ju*, to reward the goodness or evil of earthly men tests them between heaven and hell.
32. Hell and heaven will be at opposite sides.

Essentials of the Lord's Teaching, Part II.

33. *Chos ju* created Heaven, Earth, and everything in six days.
34. The world was originally good, but after man's first ancestors committed a special sin against the Lord, the good world became painful and the good man became wrong.
35. *Chos ju* descended and became a man, and expiated and redeemed from sin of all mankind.
36. Jesus, forty days after his resurrection, ascended into heaven.
37. Jesus left a footprint in the place from where he ascended into heaven.
38. The cross' marvellous capability and spiritual power are infinite and unlimited.
39. At the end of the world, the world, *Chos ju* Jesus will come down again and will judge all men in the past and present.
40. The doubts about *Chos ju*'s incarnation are clarified.
41. All the people of the world are like one body. With Adam's sin all the people get stained but all rightly share in the merits of Jesus.
42. No one should say it is too difficult to practice the Lord's teaching (*Chos ju Eyo*).
43. The man who hears the Lord's teaching, believes it and follows it immediately.

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